

Hatshepsut and Tuthmosis: a royal feud?

By Dr Joyce Tyldesley

After her death, Pharaoh Hatshepsut vanished from Egyptian history. Was her stepson, Tuthmosis III, to blame?



Colossal red granite sphinx of Hatshepsut from Deir el-Bahari

Endless death

Pharaoh Hatshepsut enjoyed a peaceful and prosperous reign. She built magnificent temples, protected Egypt's borders and masterminded a highly profitable trading mission to the mysterious land of Punt. She should have been feted as one of the most successful of the 18th Dynasty kings. Not everyone, however, was impressed by her achievements.

'The female king vanished from Egyptian history.'

Soon after her death in 1457 BC, Hatshepsut's monuments were attacked, her statues dragged down and smashed and her image and titles defaced. The female king vanished from Egyptian history. She would remain lost until, almost three thousand years later, modern Egyptologists reconstructed her damaged inscriptions and restored her to her rightful dynastic place.

The Egyptians believed that the spirit could live beyond the grave, but only if some remembrance - a body, a statue, or even a name - of the deceased remained in the land of the living. Hatshepsut had effectively been cursed with endless death. Who could have done such a terrible thing, and why? Tuthmosis III, stepson and successor to Hatshepsut, seems the obvious culprit, but we should not condemn him unheard. There are two major crimes to be considered before we draw any conclusion.

A powerful stepmother





Deir el-Bahari

Hatshepsut was a royal princess, the eldest daughter of the great general Tuthmosis I and his consort Queen Ahmose. Ahmose had failed to provide her husband with a male heir, but that did not matter overmuch; the royal harem could furnish an acceptable substitute. Prince Tuthmosis, son of a respected secondary queen, was married to his half sister Hatshepsut, and eventually succeeded to the throne unchallenged as Tuthmosis II.

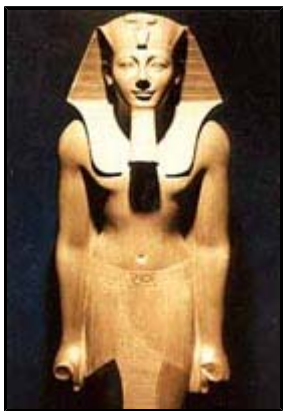
'...with no explanation, she was crowned king...'

Hatshepsut, now queen of Egypt, bore her husband/brother a daughter, Princess Neferure, but no son. When Tuthmosis II died suddenly, after a mere three years on the throne, a dynastic crisis threatened. Again there was a prince in the royal harem, but this time the prince was a baby. Under normal circumstances the royal mother would act as regent for her son; unfortunately the mother in this case was a lady of unacceptably low status. A compromise was reached. The infant Tuthmosis III would become king under the temporary guidance of his stepmother, the dowager Queen Hatshepsut.

For a couple of years Hatshepsut behaved as a totally conventional regent, acknowledging the young Tuthmosis III as the one and only pharaoh. Then, with no explanation, she was crowned king. Hatshepsut now took precedence over her stepson, and Tuthmosis was relegated to the background. He would languish in obscurity for some 20 years.

From this point onwards, Hatshepsut enjoyed a conventional reign. Military campaigns were scarce; it seems that few enemies were prepared to challenge pharaoh's might. Instead Egypt's vast resources were directed towards a nationwide improvement programme which was to see an extension of the Karnak Temple complex, and the building of the Deir el-Bahari mortuary temple, one of the most beautiful monuments of the Dynastic age. When she died, after 22 years on the throne, Hatshepsut was buried with all due honour alongside her father in the Valley of the Kings.

Co-regency



Statue of Tuthmosis III in green greywacke stone, discovered in Karnak temple's hidden statue cache.

Just one obvious aberration mars an otherwise perfect reign. Hatshepsut had usurped her stepson's throne. What could have caused her to take such unprecedented action? Legally, there was no prohibition on a woman ruling Egypt. Although the ideal pharaoh was male - a handsome, athletic, brave, pious and wise

male - it was recognised that occasionally a woman might need to act to preserve the dynastic line. When Sobeknofru ruled as king at the end of the troubled 12th Dynasty she was applauded as a national heroine. Mothers who deputised for their infant sons, and queens who substituted for husbands absent on the battlefield, were totally acceptable. What was never anticipated was that a regent would promote herself to a permanent position of power.

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Morally Hatshepsut must have known that Tuthmosis was the rightful king. She had, after all, accepted him as such for the first two years of his reign. We must therefore deduce that something happened in year three to upset the status quo and to encourage her to take power. Unfortunately, Hatshepsut never apologises and never explains. Instead she provides endless justification of her changed status, claiming on her temple walls (falsely) that both her earthly father Tuthmosis and her heavenly father, the great god Amen, intended her to rule Egypt. She goes to a great deal of trouble to appear as a typical pharaoh, even changing her official appearance so that her formal images now show her with the stereotyped king's male body, down to the false beard. Hatshepsut has realised that others will eventually question her actions, and is carving her defence in stone.

What are we to make of Hatshepsut's actions? It is too simplistic to condemn her as a ruthless power-seeker. She could not have succeeded without the backing of Egypt's elite, the men who effectively ruled Egypt on behalf of the king, so they at least must have recognised some merit in her case. Her treatment of Tuthmosis is instructive. While the boy-king lived he was a permanent threat to her reign yet, while an 'accidental' death would have been easy to arrange, she took no steps to remove him. Indeed, seemingly oblivious to the dangers of a coup, she had him trained as a soldier.

It seems that Hatshepsut did not fear Tuthmosis winning the trust of the army and seizing power. Presumably, she felt that he had no reason to hate her. Indeed, seen from her own point of view, her actions were entirely acceptable. She had not deposed her stepson, merely created an old fashioned co-regency, possibly in response to some national emergency. The co-regency, or joint reign, had been a feature of Middle Kingdom royal life, when an older king would associate himself with the more junior partner who would share the state rituals and learn his trade. As her intended successor, Tuthmosis had only to wait for his throne; no one could have foreseen that she would reign for over two decades.

The world's richest man



Tuthmosis III's mummy was rewrapped following damage by tomb robbers, then reburied in Deir el-Bahari.

Denied a prominent role in state affairs, Tuthmosis spent his childhood and adolescence preparing for the future. He was educated as a scribe and priest, developing a life-long love of literature and history, and then entered the army. By the time of Hatshepsut's death, he had risen to the rank of Commander in Chief and had enjoyed a short, victorious campaign in the Levant.

'The royal masons had been charged with the task of removing all traces of the female pharaoh.'

Tuthmosis took his throne in unsettled times. His eastern vassals, for so long quiet, were starting to challenge Egypt's dominance. A series of glorious campaigns, including the dramatic capture of Megiddo (Biblical Armageddon), saw Egypt restored to her position of power. Egypt now controlled an empire which stretched from beyond the third cataract in Nubia to the banks of the River Euphrates in Syria. The rewards of empire - plunder, tribute, taxes and gifts from those eager to be friends - made Tuthmosis the richest man in the world.

Using his hard-won wealth, Tuthmosis attempted to out-build Hatshepsut. Once again the Nile Valley echoed to the sound of hammer and chisel. But now there was destruction alongside the construction. The royal masons had been charged with the task of removing all traces of the female pharaoh. By the time of his death, some thirty-three years after his solo accession, Tuthmosis was confident that Hatshepsut's unorthodox reign would soon be forgotten.

A stepson's revenge?

It is undeniable that someone attacked Hatshepsut's monuments after her death. Archaeology indicates that the bulk of the vandalism occurred during Tuthmosis' reign. Why would he do this? At first it was imagined that this was the new king's immediate revenge against his stepmother; he was indeed cursing her with permanent death. The image of the young Tuthmosis seething with impotent rage as Hatshepsut ruled in his place is one which has attracted amateur psychologists for many years. However, it does not entirely fit with the known facts.

'...he (Tuthmosis) was indeed cursing her with permanent death...'

Tuthmosis was to prove himself a calm and prudent general, a brave man not given to hasty or irrational actions. He did not start his solo reign with an assault on Hatshepsut's memory; indeed, he allowed her a traditional funeral, and waited until it was convenient to fit the desecration into his schedule. Some of the destruction was even carried out by his son, after his death, when most of those who remembered Hatshepsut had also died. It is a remote, rather than an immediate, attack.

Furthermore the attack is not a thorough one. Enough remained of Hatshepsut to allow us to recreate her reign in some detail. Her tomb, the most obvious place to start the attack, still housed her name. Hatshepsut may have been erased from Egypt's official record, but she was never hated as Akhenaten 'The Great Criminal' would later be.

The verdict

What can we conclude from this tangled tale? We should perhaps rethink our assumptions. Hatshepsut did not fear Tuthmosis; instead of killing him, she raised him as her successor. Tuthmosis may not have hated Hatshepsut. Initially he may even have been grateful to her, as she had protected his land while training him for greatness. But, as he grew older and looked back over his life, his perspective would shift. Would Egypt's most successful general, a stickler for tradition, have wished to be associated with a woman co-regent, even a woman as strong as Hatshepsut?

'Tuthmosis set his masons to re-write history.'

By removing all obvious references to his co-ruler Tuthmosis could incorporate her reign into his own. He would then become Egypt's greatest pharaoh; the only successor to Tuthmosis II. Hatshepsut would become the unfortunate victim, not of a personal attack, but of an impersonal attempt at retrospective political

correctness.

Tuthmosis set his masons to re-write history. Their labours would last well into the reign of his successor, Amenhotep II, a king who could not remember Hatshepsut, and who had no reason to respect her memory. Meanwhile, hidden in the Valley of the Kings, Hatshepsut still rested in her coffin. Tuthmosis I had been taken from their joint tomb and re-buried, but she had been left alone. Tuthmosis knew that as long as her body survived, Hatshepsut was ensured eternal life.

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The Tombs of Senenmut by PF Dorman (New York, 1991)

Egypt of the Pharaohs by A Gardiner (Oxford, 1961)

A History of Ancient Egypt by N Grimal (translated I Shaw) (Oxford, 1992)

The Temple of Deir el-Bahari, 7 volumes, by E Naville (London, 1895-1908)

History and Chronology of the Eighteenth Dynasty: Seven Studies by DB Redford (Toronto, 1967)

Women in Ancient Egypt by G Robins (London, 1993)

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The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt by I Shaw (ed) (Oxford, 2000)

Daughters of Isis: Women of Ancient Egypt by JA Tyldesley (London, 1994)

Hatshepsut: The Female Pharaoh by JA Tyldesley (London, 1996)

Egypt's Golden Empire by JA Tyldesley (London, 2001)

Women in Ancient Egypt by B Watterson (Stroud, 1991)

Places to visit

[The British Museum](http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/visit/index.html) [<http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/visit/index.html>] . Great Russell Street, London. Tel: 0207 323 8299. The British Museum is free to everybody and opens at 10am every day.

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